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# Positioning Theory and Discourse Analysis: Some Tools for Social Interaction Analysis

*Francisco Tirado & Ana Gálvez\**

**Abstract:** »*Theorie der Positionierung und Diskursanalyse: Werkzeuge für die Analyse sozialer Interaktionen*«. This article outlines positioning theory as a discursive analysis of interaction, focusing on the topic of conflict. Moreover, said theory is applied to a new work environment for the social sciences: virtual spaces. The analysis is organized in the following way. First, the major key psycho-social issues which define the topic of conflict are reviewed. Then, virtual environments are presented as a new work space for the social sciences. Thirdly, a synthesis of positioning theory and its FOUCAULTian legacy is conducted, while appreciating its particular appropriateness for analyzing conflictive interaction in virtual environments. An empiric case is then presented. This consists of an analysis of interactive sequences within a specific virtual environment: the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) *Humanitats i Filologia Catalana* studies forum. Through positioning theory, the production and effects that a conflictive interaction sequence has on the community in which it is produced are understood and explained.

**Keywords:** positioning theory, socialization, conflict, social interaction, virtual environments.

## 1. Introduction: The Problem of Interaction in Social Thinking

In recent decades we have seen the development of several social theories and methodologies which are characterized by their interest in the face-to-face interaction, routines and classifications in daily life, the scripts of our conversations, the situated definitions of “I,” the situational relevance and the production of discourse. In short: micro-interaction leading to the production of social order. Among the most widely-known and noteworthy are symbolic interactionism, cognitive sociology, ethnomethodology, social phenomenology,

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“ethogeny” or conversational and discourse analysis (CORCUFF, 1995; FLECHA, GÓMEZ & PUIGVERT, 2001; GIDDENS, 1967).

Such approaches challenge those social sciences determined to analyze society and the institutional dimension holistically, as well as the cultural change as dimension which is separate from or transcendental to the actors who suffer or promote it. Writers such as KNORR-CETINA (1983) have made the expression “micro-sociological mode for social explanation” popular to refer to the proposals put forth by said perspectives. A similar approximation is fundamentally characterized by four assumptions:

- 1) the role that language plays in the production of social reality;
- 2) the importance placed on the organizational nature of practical reasoning;
- 3) the decisive intervention of symbolic communication; and
- 4) the consideration that is given to the rules and resources that govern social explanations, negotiation and management of meaning in the actual interaction.

These four aspects on the one hand involve a movement from a standard notion of social order to a pragmatic and performative type of conceptualization. Secondly, they reject methodological individualism in favor of methodological situationalism. Thirdly, they reformulate the problem of the relationship between the individual and the structure which was traditionally expressed as merely the juxtaposition of elements and suggest that it is an emerging relationship between the action and the structure. Finally, if in normative sociology the individual is a machine which assimilates and internalizes the always preexisting regulations, rules and social values, he is conditioned by his social origin, or rather his social class, socio-economic status, and is a completely passive entity, with no possible agency; in the micro-sociologies, the individual is seen as an active hermeneutic being, with agency and implicated in each one of his acts in the destruction, reproduction and creation of social order.

In this way, one of the assumptions in which all of the micro sociologies fully converge upon is the intense micro-analysis of interaction within the context as its very production. Interactions constitute the essential humus of social life. It is assumed that the person is always an active participant in the construction of the contexts of interaction. The social structures and society do not preexist the individual, nor do they exist independently or separate from his actions. It is true that they offer guidelines, general guides which delimit the possibilities of interaction, but it is in the interaction itself where they are used and constantly change. And therein also resides the possibility of transformation.

In all of these approaches, a change in the status of the studied phenomena can also be observed. That is, they set out to analyze social interaction situations as completely legitimate objects of analysis. For many supporters of the micro social perspectives, interaction is appropriately considered to be a form of social organization. It structures the actions and interchanges between the

different actors. In this way, when referring to social organization, it is assumed that the micro and macro levels are by nature already integrated into its day-to-day outcomes. On a daily basis, individuals continually engage in small interactions, minute actions, which determine, influence and configure the framework within which certain macro actions may be undertaken and be meaningful. These small actions are undertaken in a routine and usual way, but they are neither insignificant, nor do they lack relevance or are even difficult. To the contrary, they rest on a strong, dense cultural organization. The study and analysis of these micro processes helps us understand the methods by which people operate and how their daily micro activities build and form macrostructures (GÁLVEZ & TIRADO, 2006).

One of the privileged spaces in which to conduct the mentioned analysis has been day-to-day discourse and conversations. The works of ANTAKI (1994), EDWARDS (1997), EDWARDS and POTTER (1992), POTTER (1996) and POTTER and WETHERELL (1987), among others, have gathered the previous challenges and have proposed the analysis of discourse as a privileged mechanism for understanding social interaction. Nevertheless, among the different suggestions that have emerged in this same line, we highlight positioning theory (DAVIES & HARRÉ, 1990; HARRÉ & VAN LANGENHOVE, 1991, 1999). There are two characteristics which make this theory especially interesting. In the first place, it is strongly indebted to the proposals of FOUCAULT. And, secondly, such indebtedness makes it especially appropriate for the analysis of a very particular phenomenon: interactive conflict. This topic has not really been studied in depth by the proposals which use discourse analysis to examine social interaction. Non-conflictive routines, normative phenomena, daily conversations, etc., have received much more attention. However, as FOUCAULT (1969) demonstrates, social order is a precarious result that emerges from the confrontation and collision of statements.

Our work follows this line of interest. On the one hand, we attempt to outline positioning theory as a discursive analysis of interaction, while basing our exercise on the topic of conflict. On the other hand, we apply this tool to a new work environment for the social sciences: virtual spaces. They prove to be especially appropriate for studying social interaction through language and discourse. And, furthermore, we find ourselves before two interesting circumstances: a) there are not many social analyses on interaction in virtual environments, and b) there are still even fewer analyses regarding online conflictive interaction.

Our analysis is organized in the following way. We first review the key psychosocial issues which are normally handled when the topic of conflict is addressed. Following this, we present virtual environments as a new work space for the social sciences. Thirdly, we conduct a synthesis of positioning theory and its FOUCAULTian legacy, appreciating its particular appropriateness for analyzing conflictive interaction in virtual environments. Immediately follow-

ing this, we present our empiric case. This consists of the analysis of interactive sequences within a specific virtual environment: the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) *Humanitats i Filologia Catalana* studies forum, and, more specifically, of the study of a conflictive sequence. Through positioning theory, we begin to understand its production and the effects that it has on the community in which it is produced.

## 2. The Key Psychosocial Issues of Conflict

“Conflict” is a word that we habitually use in very different contexts. We often talk about conflict of interests, economic conflicts, relationship conflicts, institutional conflicts, etc. As may be observed, its use attempts to define situations that are essentially negative, moments of incompatible interests, opposing representations. A typical definition of “conflict” which would be in line with the aforementioned might be the following: “Conflict is a perceived divergence of interests or beliefs, which makes it impossible for the horizontal aspirations of the parties to be simultaneously achieved” (SUARES, 1996, p.76).

Three elements powerfully stand out in this conceptualization. First, perception. Conflict is an issue of the perception of interests or beliefs. Secondly, we see that there are individual aspirations. The people who are immersed in a conflict have opposing and incompatible wishes or needs. Thirdly, the clear negative value that the divergence receives is noteworthy. When this occurs, we see the frustration of certain people who can not fulfill their legitimate individual aspirations. All of the above makes conflict an undesirable event, which should be resolved when it appears. Its eruption suggests that there must be an intervention to change the perception of the opposing parties or their individual aspirations. In summary, conflict is negative and it must be resolved.

For more than two decades, within the social sciences in general, and, more specifically, within Social Psychology, there has been a reconceptualization of the phenomenon of conflict. Its imminently negative nature has been substituted with a positive definition. In that same line, for example, the works of DOISE and MOSCOVICI (1984) stand out. In a series of experiments on group decision making, they state that disagreements can help make better quality and contextually accurate decisions. Conflict provides a greater range of judgments and opinions, increases the probabilities of finding new arguments and also, valid solutions that were not contemplated at the beginning of the discussion. The main characteristics of this positive approach are summarized in the following aspects:

- 1) Conflict is not really a problem, but rather an opportunity. It strengthens change and is an opportunity to transform a state of affairs.
- 2) Conflict must be analyzed and understood within the context of the situation in which it is produced, it has an imminently contextual and situational character. Likewise, it may be concluded that it is a social con-

struction. It is formed thanks to set cultural patterns that give it the meaning that it will have in the situations in which it is produced and is continually defined and redefined by the agents implicated in its dynamic.

3) From the aforementioned it can be deduced that conflict is a complex situation. Its analysis must avoid monocausal explanations or reductionisms.

4) Similarly, conflict has an important discursive dimension.

All conflict is a process. It is produced and unfolds, as already mentioned, within a concrete situation. Nevertheless, the analyst accesses the conflict and its situation through the explanations and accounts that the implicated parties develop on the conflictive event. Thus, it is shaped and takes relevance from these narratives, which have a fundamental impact on the protagonists' actions. Any analytical approximation or tool and understanding of the conflict must evaluate its positive nature and pay attention to those aspects just mentioned.

With few exceptions, an example being the work of GARFINKEL and WIEDER (1992), the situation of conflict or conflictive interaction has not been analyzed much by social scientists who work with qualitative methods. Priority has been given to topics such as normative production, the reproduction of roles and particular social beliefs or the discursive constitution of certain subjectivities. As WETHERELL and POTTER (1992) recognize, the way to explain this state of things must be found in the fact that the analysis of regularities in micro-interactions generates the illusion that it is much easier to pass up on these in favor of more general and institutional dimensions.

This situation has become more apparent especially with the appearance of virtual environments as new spaces for analyzing social thinking. Such environments provide a notable interactive, linguistic and discursive dimension; therefore, they are susceptible to being studied from the aforementioned perspective. But, moreover, they have revealed that conflict is an important dimension in their constitution and maintenance. The anonymous and distance nature which define such environments allow conflict to appear and evolve more easily. In short, these new environments suggest new questions and a new challenge: to find discursive tools that make it possible to analyze interaction and conflict in its positive and productive dimension.

### 3. The Problem of Social Interaction in Virtual Spaces

In recent years extensive literature has appeared on the changes and new situations which the expansion of virtual environments is bringing about in different areas of our day-to-day reality (ARONOWITZ, MARTINSONS & MENSER, 1996; CASTELLS, 2001; LOADER, 1998; SMITH & KOLLOCK, 1999). In this sense, there is talk of social, economic, cultural, political and artistic transformations among others. At first, such literature tried to disclose an entire ensemble of technological innovations and speculate on the social changes that

they could implement. Figures such as cyborgs, socio-technical lattices or virtual communities were the permanent and privileged actors in those texts (PISCITELLI, 1995; SHIELDS, 1996). More recently, more specialized literature has come out focusing on the concrete phenomenon of virtual communities. Defining what they are, how they work, and what happens in them, or promoting interaction within them, the participation and connection, constitute primordial objectives of such works (SMITH & KOLLOCK, 1999).

The notion of virtual community is frequently associated with the characteristics of which we normally understand by groups in physical life. These characteristics refer to the following dimensions: 1. the relationship formed by the people who are part of the same virtual environment; 2. the fact that they share interests, objectives, goals and even knowledge within such an environment; 3. the interdependence that is created during this exercise; and 4. the progressive accumulation of a baggage of shared experiences that is used as the backdrop to define group membership (RHEINGOLD, 1996; WELLMAN et al., 1996).

Despite this body of investigation on virtual environments, the latter present a topic that has been systematically avoided: conflict. There is a lack of work analyzing the implications of failing in forming a virtual community, what a conflictive interaction episode means in a forum and how the discrepancy of opinions or disagreements and problems are managed within such collectives (KOLKO & REID, 1998). There would be two reasons for explaining this systematic absence. The first has to do with the fact that there still isn't any agreement on the criteria which defines these formations called "virtual communities" or "virtual environments." Given that there is no consensus on what is behind the concept, it would be difficult to analyze the phenomena of disruption and conflict in these formations. The second alludes directly to the problem of analyzing interaction. It is clear that "conflict," aside from the perspective that is used to define it, refers to an interactive sequence, an event that is implemented in and due to interaction. Moreover, for many writers, it is a specific type of interaction (GERGEN, 1996). So, given that we are still in an incipient phase in the analysis of interaction in virtual spaces, at a moment when we are searching for adequate methods and tools for studying it with certain rigor and interest, it is understandable that conflict still hasn't been analyzed with a certain frequency and regularity (GÁLVEZ, 2004).

Thus, positioning theory is a tool which makes it possible to alleviate this problem.

#### 4. Positioning Theory

Positioning theory is an interactionist approach which has the peculiarity of having been composed within the field of Social Psychology. The principle texts addressing it can be found in HARRÉ and VAN LANGENHOVE (1999), even if the founding concepts come from DAVIES and HARRÉ (1990) and

HARRÉ and VAN LANGENHOVE (1991). The text by GALVEZ (2004) stands out by illustrating one of its most recent applications.

The concept of position and positioning was introduced by DAVIES and HARRÉ (1990) and appears to have origins in marketing. In marketing, position refers to the communication strategies that allow certain products to be placed in a market among their competitors. In the social sciences, the concept of positioning was used for the first time in a text by HOLLWAY (1984) which analyzed the construction of subjectivity in the area of heterosexual relationships. The use of positioning comes from this author and is characterized by its explanation of positions as relation processes that constitute interaction with other individuals. Positioning can be understood as the discursive construction of personal narrations. These are used to construct the actions of an individual in a way which is intelligible to herself and others. In addition, they create an space in which members participating in the conversation have a series of specific positions.

The fundamental core of positioning theory's proposals is the idea of discursive practice. Among the key authors who provide background in this area are BAKHTIN, BENVENISTE or WITTGENSTEIN (HARRÉ, 1979; HARRÉ & SECORD, 1973; POTTER & WETHERELL, 1987). The central problem in analyzing social reality lies with social deeds and, among them, speech acts. These do not have any fixed or static structure, but are linked, connected and developed through the rhythm of the interaction. Social reality arises from three discursive practices: conversations, institutional practices and the use of rhetoric. Of these three, conversations constitute the essential element of social reality. In them our daily reality is reproduced and transformed.

In its turn, the idea of discourse is understood as the institutional use of the language. This institutionalization can occur on different levels: disciplinary, political, cultural, and in small groups. Discourse is not intended something which is localized in each individual's mind nor as something which has a personal form, but as a collective and dynamic process through which meanings are constructed, acquired and transformed. The constituent force of the discourse is given special attention, and in particular the discursive practices, and at the same time it is understood that people are able to choose alternatives with relation to these practices. The constituent force of each discourse practice is rooted in the fact that we provide the subject's positions. In this sense the theory concedes a special relevance to conversation, so much so that it claims the positioning is a phenomenon of conversation. As such, it produces evident effects. Positioning adds, in part, one conceptual index to another: a position for the individuals within a structure of rights for those who use this index. Once a determined position has been taken, the individual perceives and interprets the world from and through that strategic position. The concrete images, metaphors, narrative lines and concepts are relevant to the particular discursive practice and where they have been positioned.



However it is important to clarify that the sense of positionings is extremely dynamic and changes easily. They fluctuate depending on the narratives, metaphors and images through which they are constructed. Additionally, they are negotiable, in the sense that before a determined act of positioning there is always the possibility to question it. It is possible to resist such an act and its implications or the consequences it could have. In absence of any protest or rejection by the positioned individual, the positioning individual does not question or proposes the position to the other, and the immediate consequence is the confirmation of that positioning and the construction of the other in function of the moral order of that position. However, the possibility to consent or submit to the assigned positioning is equally as present as the possibility to resist it. One can always attack or subvert this assignment.

The social action constructed with the statement, along with the set of effects and consequences caused by it, are partially a function of the narratives which have unfolded between the speakers, and the positions that each has taken within the narrative. Said positions constitute something which always remains open to future negotiations.

The idea of positioning is a conceptual and methodological resource especially appropriate for studying interaction in virtual spaces for two reasons. In the first place because it considers that all interaction is discursive or narrative; and, secondly, because it understands that this is a changing, fragmented and absolutely contextual phenomenon. Similarly, it is a model which is especially appropriate for analyzing conflict because it assumes that it is an interactive process which is situationally developed and whose analysis must be conducted based on the active role that the agents take on in such a process. Their agency goes through, above all, the assignment of positions and the attribution of responsibilities. Thus, it can be said that there are two areas which articulate the proposals of positioning theory. On the one hand, the people in their constant interaction; and on the other, the narrative accounts that are constructed within this dynamic. These pillars provide coherence and meaning to positioning, understood as the construction of narrative accounts which configure a person's activities so they are intelligible to himself and others, and in which the members that participate in the narrative have a series of specific positions.

In positioning theory, episodes occupy a predominate place. They make up the fundamental units which shape social reality.

For HARRÉ and VAN LANGENHOVE (1999), episodes are the fundamental units that shape social reality and structure the meetings as well as the derivative social interaction. These episodes group the different sequences of interaction together, to form a whole with sense and meaning. In all episodes there are two very important elements. The first is the position. This is a relationship, which is established between an "I" and "another" in an audience. Furthermore, it is not at all static, it is negotiated, and it changes and is adapted to the opinions of the others. In short, it moves and transforms within the inter-

action. The second is positioning. The complex game of positions and their negotiation always produces one result: a positioning. This is no more than an intelligible map which provides meaning for the actual interaction that develops in each episode. It is contextualized, or rather, there is no reason for it to be viewed further outside of the actual episode as it develops at the same time as the episode and is immanent because it feeds off of the action that appears in such a display. The idea of positioning is above all characterized by understanding positions as relational processes, which are founded upon interaction and negotiation with other people. Positionings are some-what like the fine threads that weave the lattice of social interaction. They are the warp of our interactive situations.

Positioning is a term that refers to the actions in which competent people find themselves in and are bound by their interaction within a system of rights and responsibilities, of possibilities and nonsense. Therefore, positioning is the actual socialization that unfolds in the interaction. Positioning and socialization are synonyms. This of course applies whenever it is accepted that the latter is not an entity which is beyond the interaction and its production process. To sum up, articulating a positioning in an interactive phenomenon is no more and no less than showing the emergence of the socialization which derives from it. "This configuration follows changing patterns of mutual rights and responsibilities which fluctuate depending on the context and the moment in which it is said or carried out" (GÁLVEZ, 2004, p.99).

From all of the above, it can be deduced that it would be a mistake to believe that positioning is the product of an intentional game or the sum of the norms established by an ensemble of predefined roles. It's more than that, the intentions acquire their meaning within it; and, paradoxically, it's less than that, given that each episode emerges in situ, in the simple game of positioning and repositioning the "other" which occurs in all interactions. Thus, analyzing interaction in virtual environments based on the study of the episodes-positionings which are formed in it is, at the very least, an exercise which analyses the production of online socialization. And in our specific case, the topic of conflict must be added as another key dimension in said production.

We propose to use positioning theory to analyze a very concentrated type of interaction: that which occurs in virtual spaces. Nevertheless, this theory has been used to analyze the production of stereotypes, the creation of social identity (SABAT & HARRÉ, 1999) and intergroup relations (TAN & MOGHADAM, 1999). As can be seen from the types of studies done, positioning theory attempts to overcome strict macro or micro-social limits. It seeks to create a type of empirical analysis which articulates micro and macro-processes in a single explanatory whole. Its analyses, far from considering the interaction participants as clean slates who easily change subject position and when the situation alters, it considers them to be active agents in the construction of the interactions, and pays special attention to the aspect of continuity which can

link different episodes of the interaction. These links can be maintained in following interactions as well.

But before moving into our empiric case to illustrate the methodological and heuristic value of positioning theory, we will briefly review its FOUCAULTian roots.

## 5. The FOUCAULTian Legacy of Positioning Theory

Positioning theory owes three large debts to FOUCAULTian approaches on language and discourse.

The first has to do with the concept of language as a historically and ideologically contextualized social action (FOUCAULT, 1969). In fact, in positioning theory what is said is more than just simply words. What is said helps situate and define the other and, at the same time, to situate and define ourselves. In this manner, between the “I” and the “other” a system of rights and responsibilities is established which is not transcendent but rather immanent to the actual act of speaking and interacting.

This first idea owes much to the conception of discourse addressed by Michel FOUCAULT. Let us remember that for this author, discourse is something more than speech or a set of statements. Discourse is a practice with clear rules of production.

Complex beam of relationships that function as rules: prescribe what must be set in the relationship, in a discursive practice, so that it refers to this or that object, so that it brings into play this or that statement, so that it utilizes this or that ensemble, so that it organizes this or that strategy. To define in its singular individuality a formation system is, then, characterized by a discourse or statement group of the regularity of a practice (FOUCAULT, 1969, pp.122-123).

Discourses are social practices. Their rules are anonymous, historical, fixed in time and space, which for given communities at a concrete period define the conditions for any type of statement.

The words and the things are the—serious—title of the problem. They are the—ironic—title of the work which modifies its shape, the movement of data, and, in the end, reveals a totally distinct task. This task consists in not handling—in ceasing to handle—discourses as ensembles of signs (of meaningful elements which are sent in content or representations), and instead consider them as practices which systematically shape the objects which are discussed. It is indubitably that discourses are made up of signs, but what they do is more than utilize these signs to indicate thing. That is what most makes words and language so tough. It is this ‘more’ that must be revealed and described (FOUCAULT, 1969, p.81).

The analysis of discursive practices constitutes a diagnosis of the present, of the guidelines and rules of our social relationships. This is precisely the goal of positioning theory.

The second debt appears in the very idea of positioning. This is actually a revision and up-dating of the definition that FOUCAULT gives to “statement.” We shall remember that against the multitude of words and the infinite number of grammatical sentences that can be produced in a language, the statement is a limited event, in fact, its production is rare. Statements can be conserved, repeated, paraphrased, denied, and even ignored, but always under strict conditions of use, which make it possible to “despite all of the different ways they may be stated, repeat them identically” (FOUCAULT, 1969, p.174). And these same appropriation conditions are what, at a certain moment, will define the appearance of a new statement. (The statement that the “Earth is round” is not the same statement before and after Galileo [FOUCAULT, 1969].) It is thus understood that due to their nature as events, they hold a certain value for a certain community.

So, the statement circulates, serves, steals, allows or impedes the realization of a wish, it is docile or rebellious to certain interests, it enters into the order of the battles and fights, it is converted into a topic of appropriation or rivalry (FOUCAULT, 1969, p.177).

The value of the statement does not reside in the truth that its content manifests, but rather the exact opposite: it resides in its circulation, interchange and transformation capacity.

But, we must not forget that the statement is also an ideological unit, an entity which produces a difficult social order, a way of articulating words and things (FOUCAULT, 1966). Or in the words of BAJTIN: “it is not possible to understand a particular statement without participating in its axiological atmosphere” (BAJTIN, 1928, p 69). The statement always has to do with a historical and contextual production of values and their effects; “Only one statement can be beautiful, just as only one statement can be true or false, bold or timid, etc.” (BAJTIN, 1928, p.147).

So, the idea of positioning is a clear updating of the idea of the statement. Positioning is an imminent production of an interaction exercise, which is more than just the words, gestures, looks or sentences that form it. It is the intelligible map on which all of these elements enter into a relationship and are articulated giving meaning to the whole. But, with an absolutely contextualized meaning in the very execution of the interaction. Most likely it is here where the great difference is found with FOUCAULT’s statement. For this writer, the production of statements is subject to historical movements of a greater reach. Their production did not land in the field of daily interaction itself. In positioning theory, it is in this daily exercise where positionings and statements are incessantly produced, reproduced and transformed.

This FOUCAULTian legacy allows positioning theory to analyze social processes based on the study of their conditions of the possibility or reality of their statements, now positionings, which should never be confused either with a timeless structure, nor with the extrinsic (semantical or grammatical) condi-

tions of validity placed on the formation of sentences or propositions. All “discursive practice” (positioning) shall be understood as a historical, localized event which carries a: “set of anonymous, historical rules which are always determined by the time and space that have defined the conditions of exercising the statement function in any given epoch, and for a given social, economic, geographic or linguistic area” (FOUCAULT, 1969, p.198). Again: positioning theory updates this definition by applying it to the very act of daily interaction as a historical and contextual frame.

The third debt is established with the agonal character which, according to FOUCAULT (1963), is present in the production of statements. They are not formulated within a context of knowledge or informative erudition. On the contrary, they are the result of opposing social forces, opposite interests, a collision of several statements, etc. That is, a kind of hot and feverish tectonic exists which perceives the eruption and survival of a statement against other alternatives.

Michel FOUCAULT (1972 and 1973) explicitly addresses the problem of statement production, and relates this question with the production of events at the intersection of different forces or social trends. In fact, in these texts discourse has the nature of happening. The happening carries associated words like: chance, discontinuity, transformation, shock ... All of these destabilize the possibility of a structuralist explanation of its emergence and all of them enclose the origin of a powerful criticism in the same notion of structure. In order to approach the happening, FOUCAULT proposes confining it, to establish different series, divergent intersections, in short, to map out the conditions of its happening, the margins of chance, of its risk. This exercise can be done within the territory of the discourse. This is tremendously informative. Discourses refers to the happening, it shows us both its appearance and also its dynamics.

[...] do not let the discourse make its nucleus, the heart of thought or a meaning that is manifested in it, become interior and hidden; but, starting with the discourse itself, from its apparition and its regularity, examine its external conditions of possibility, examine that which motivates the random series of these occurrences and that fixes the limits (FOUCAULT, 1973, p. 56).

In agreement with this, he proposed four concepts that regulate the analysis of discourses: that of the happening, that of the series, that of regularity, and that of the condition of possibility. Here we have four rules which are almost methodological. From these it can be quickly inferred that conflict is considered as a productive element rather than a problematic one. That is to say, conflict leads to happening, discourses and its productive variability.

So, again, positioning theory updates this approach applying it to the agonal process of interaction. The many different interactive sequences in which we see ourselves immersed in our daily life mean confronting several different positions. In the permanent game of positioning and being positioned, little by

little, positioning (statement) is defined. Its emergence is slow and agonal, it is the result of forces that confront and self-define each other. This issue converts positioning theory into an approach which is especially sensitive to the topic of conflict. Rather than a problem, conflict is understood as something productive, a relationship in which positioning occurs, or in other words, socialization itself.

## 6. Conflict in the *Humanitats i Filologia* Virtual Forum

The analysis that we will now undertake, is based on a much more extensive case study conducted over a period of two years (GÁLVEZ, 2004). Our object is a Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) forum. It is important to clarify that the UOC is a distance university. It uses pedagogical models that are based on multimedia or interactive technology. It is a new challenge because it bases its educational system on the concept of a “virtual campus” (CV). From home and by way of a personal computer connected to the network, students can be in permanent contact with university services, with all of the professors and the rest of the students. The different subjects are followed and developed by means of the different virtual spaces that the CV offers. So, our work has focused specifically on the *Humanitats i Filologia* (Humanities and Philology) forum. This space is open to all UOC students. It doesn’t belong to a specific classroom and it transverses all subjects and disciplines.

In the analyzed forum, three messages appear sent by three users creating one of the most interesting episodes in the forum. Although the episode isn’t very long as far as the number of missives, it is particularly representative of many of the processes and dimensions which develop in positionings. For this reason, we’ve selected it to be a part of this article. What follows is a reproduction of the full content of the entire episode.

FH-515 -----

Topic: This afternoon

Date: 00:49:23 27/10/98

From: Mario

To: Fòrum Humanitats i Filologia

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... Today I went to the demonstration against Pinochet in Barcelona. I didn't see any of you. It was at a reasonable time, around 8 in the evening. The truth is that I am very sad about not having seen any of you, not even one of you. There isn't much of an excuse. While 1 million people went to the "Passeig de Gràcia" a year ago and demonstrated for ONE PERSON who was killed by ETA; only a little more than 2000 people showed up for all of the thousands that were assassinated by Pinochet.

Where were all of you?

A10.

M.

FH-517 -----

Topic: RE: This afternoon

Date: 02:50:31 27/10/98

From: AgustíTo: Fòrum Humanitats i Filologia

Well, well, well!

I think it's a bit inappropriate to throw in people's faces what someone does or doesn't do ... I was talking about work, it's been months since I've been paid given my status as a casual laborer. Maybe you think I should have gone to the demonstration and go another month without being paid, I don't know.

On the other hand, I don't really believe in liturgy and for me, demonstrations are no more than liturgy (as are meetings, conferences, debates, protests, social activities ...)

If it helps, in some way I've gotten involved (I have a direct relationship with the person who reported the presence of Pinocchio in London to Garzón's National High Court) in this affair, but I won't explain in what way nor will I ask anyone else why I haven't seen their campus.jpg in body and spirit here or there.

I usually really like what you say, Mario. But this time you've left me a bit stupefied... I suppose this is a joke and I just haven't caught on. Sometimes I get more excited about the shots in the back than the rebellious floor at the Corte Inglés department store and for the record, I don't mean anyone in particular (I don't mean you, as I don't know you): I'm talking about moralist behaviors that amaze me and right now inspire me and infuriate me.

Sincerely,

Agustí

FH-518-----

Topic: Quantity and quality

Date: 10:04:30 27/10/98

From: César

To: Fòrum Humanitats i Filologia

It's a very interesting topic to see why people get involved. I, for example, still have not gone to a single demonstration of any kind to ask for anything. Why? Because I'm embarrassed ..

But, on the other hand, I can get fired up and say lots of things in a forum like this, defending positions that, sometimes, are reasonable, and other times are ridiculous. For example, get fired up because someone says "bridge course" and the UOC says "complementary training," when what really matters is that there could be second cycle students that haven't even opened a history book in their life. Politically correct euphemisms, another of my crusades.

Demonstrations are a question of marketing. Of supply and demand, of a good publicity campaign. As simple (and as cruel) as that. I didn't know that there was a demonstration in favor of the extradition of Pinochet, for example. But, when I was in Egypt, isolated from the world, in the middle of the desert, I knew that there had been a demonstration in favor of a guy named Miguel Ángel Blanco. ("Who?", I asked, because I had no idea who this poor man was when I left home a few days before.)

None of you believe this? Madrid. A million people demonstrate in 1974, during the final public appearance of the Caudillo. Another million demonstrate in favor of the Constitution in 1983. Another million or so when the Pope came. Hundreds of thousands in favor of abortion. Hundreds of thousands against. With education reform, the same. In favor of GAL, against GAL, etc. If we begin to add them up, we would see that either Madrid has some 40 million people or that the 4 million people that actually live in its area of influence are capable of demonstrating in favor of the Pope and abortion, or the Caudillo and the Constitution, for example. Barcelona? The same.

It's not a question of asking about the morality of who goes and who doesn't go to the demonstrations. It's more of a question of asking why it isn't promoted so that people go or don't go.

Because, as we all know, people go where they are told, but they have to be told. There is a select core group that believes in the cause and exercises their right to demonstrate; the rest follow the core group.

The world is very hard on people loaded with good will ...

César

..)

The names that appear have been changed to protect their privacy. As the reader can observe, the episode begins when Mario sends a message recriminating his forum companions for not attending a demonstration against Pinochet held in Barcelona. His letter begins a great conflict. In order to understand its development, we must go further than the actual content that appears in the messages. How Mario's recrimination unleashes complex answers that position and contraposition the implicated actors must be analyzed. And, above all, it is fundamental to examine how this positioning game is an interactive sequence that gives way to a certain positioning and, therefore, also to a particular social arrangement in our forum. Such arrangement, together with many others that emerge with the configuration of other positioning episodes, constitute one of the threads that weave together the *Humanitats i Filologia virtual forum*, into a social and cultural fabric, as a generational space of significance and meaning. Let's see how the positioning and repositioning game is produced:

• Message 1: "Mario the recriminator"

The message that begins the episode appears with the title "Pinochet Demonstration." In his letter, Mario defines himself as a champion for the social-political cause and recriminating judge of the lack of commitment and implication in the fight for justice which appears in the forum of which he is a member:

Today I went to the demonstration against Pinochet in Barcelona. And I didn't see any of you.

Mario presents and positions his forum companions as people who totally lack commitment and implication in social issues.

The truth is that I am very sad about not having seen any of you, not even one of you. There isn't much of an excuse.

Such position creates a lattice of rights and obligations in which Mario is the judge, evaluating what his companions do and should do. As such, he obliges the others, through interpellation, to explain their acts and accept and publicly recognize their guilt. The writer reprimands his forum companions. He seems disappointed by the small number of people at the demonstration and blames his disappointment on his companions, who are no other than the representatives of all those who did not go to the demonstration.



• Message 2: “The resistance of Agustí”

Agustí answers Mario, and does it by resisting the position that he has been given. His resistance is sustained on several processes in which the arguments that sustained the position outlined by Mario in the first intervention are refuted, challenged and negotiated.

Agustí rejects and retests Mario’s position as the evaluating judge and censure him as such. He does it by calling for a standard of cultural conduct, common courtesy and civility according to which it would be inappropriate and immoral to ask others to explain their actions as well as recriminate them.

I think it’s a bit inappropriate to throw in people’s faces what someone does or doesn’t do ... I’m talking about moralist behaviors that amaze me and right now inspire me and infuriate me.

Interestingly, his position intensifies and strengthens Mario’s initial position. This is because Agustí justifies his individual behavior while at the same time giving an excuse. He explains his absence by appealing to his personal circumstances. The excuse and justification acts as an acceptance of “guilt” and, in consequence, only reinforces Mario’s initial position.

... I was talking about work; it’s been months since I’ve been paid given my status as a casual laborer. Maybe you think I should have gone to the demonstration and go another month without being paid, I don’t know.

He we observe a double effect. On the one hand Agustí repositions himself, and at the same time, he repositions Mario’s initial stand. Such repositioning game is mainly played out through the two movements in which the fundamentals of Mario’s initial position are re-signified. They consist of the following:

a) *A movement re-signifying the “demonstration”*: A new meaning is assigned to “demonstration,” different and opposite to that which appeared in the initial position with which this episode was opened. The re-signification above all has to do with underestimating this act as a mechanism for social protest and its definition as a vacuous and ineffective action.

... I don’t really believe in liturgy and for me, demonstrations are no more than liturgy (as are meetings, conferences, debates, protests, social activities ...

b) *A movement re-signifying political implication and the fight for justice*: Here, Agustí indicates what it means to carry out acts of political implication which are used to fight for social justice. Acts among which, of course, do not include going to demonstrations.

If it helps, in some way I’ve gotten involved (I have a direct relationship with the person who reported the presence of Pinocchio in London to Garzon’s National High Court) in this affair, but I won’t explain in what way nor will I ask anyone else why I haven’t ... Sometimes I get more excited about the shots in the back than the rebellious floor at the Corte Inglés department store and for the record, I don’t mean anyone in particular ...

Through the two aforementioned movements Agustí questions the initial position that Mario gave himself as well as the one that he gave to the others. In this way, Mario, who at first was the champion for the social fight, now appears as someone whose acts not only do not comply with the intended function, but rather form part of a marketing effort for social rebellion, boasting and exhibitionism. Mario is repositioned as a moralist with a false commitment to the empty fight. Through the contraposition with Mario's behavior, Agustí repositions himself as the one who is truly committed to socio-political issues. As someone who is consistent without the need to boast or publicize the acts that actually have effects on social claims.

Although the reinforcement position strengthened Mario's initial position, we have before us a global effect of questioning, refuting and rejecting the former. The form which shapes the lattice of the rights and responsibilities which emerge in this positioning game takes its meaning opposite that which emerged in Mario's position. Thus, Agustí disapproves of Mario's moral order as he strips him of his right to pass judgment on the behavior of the others.

• Message 3: "César focuses and concludes"

César sends a third message which is a follow-up on the act of resistance unleashed by Agustí. In this message, we observe two positions. In the first, the writer positions himself based on two pillars: the first has to do with "what I'm like" and the second with "what I'm concerned about." This self positioning acquires meaning in the questioning that he establishes regarding Mario's position. César, in some way, justifies his absence at the demonstration alluding personal embarrassment of the multitudes at these events.

It's a very interesting topic to see why people get involved. I, for example, still have not gone to a single demonstration of any kind to ask for anything. Why? Because I'm embarrassed ...

But, then, he presents a series of problems which are the ones that he worries about on a daily basis.

But, on the other hand, I can get fired up and say lots of things in a forum like this, defending positions that, sometimes, are reasonable, and other times are ridiculous ...

Once César defines and shows himself as he is, he initiates another position. This time it is not related to him as a person, but with the proposals of Mario's initial position. The second position is carried out by two movements.

a) *A movement that continues re-signifying the "demonstration"*: This movement represents an enforcement of what we mentioned in Agustí's intervention. In this way, apart from adding to the underestimation of the phenomenon itself, he repositions the demonstrators from people revindicating justice to people without opinions who follow the few that lead the way.

Demonstrations are a question of marketing. Of supply and demand, of a good publicity campaign. As simple (and as cruel) as that ...

b) *A movement re-signifying interest in the problem*: With this movement, César defines and localizes the topic's true center of interest. It is no longer interesting to wonder about the purpose of demonstrations as mechanisms for revindicating justice, but rather to ask why attendance at this type of event is promoted, about the reason for promoting or not promoting attendance at these acts.

It's not a question of asking about the morality of who goes and who doesn't go to the demonstrations. It's more of a question of asking why it isn't promoted so that people go or don't go. Because, as we all know, people go where they are told, but they have to be told. There is a select core group that believes in the cause and exercises their right to demonstrate; the rest follow the core group ...

The game of positioning and repositioning has fulfilled the purpose of shaping a fine lattice of rights and responsibilities that affects all forum participants. In this case, reinforcement is established and intensifies what was initiated by Agustí. But there's much more. César stands as someone who holds certainties similar to those held by Mario. He positions himself as someone who is capable of seeing further out than the majority. He has an intuition about the invisible strings that control people's behavior. From this privileged position, he feels he has the obligation to disclose the nature of the behavior of most of the people who go to demonstrations, and define them as an ensemble of beings with no opinions who are controlled by what he himself calls the "quality core": a minority who know what they are revindicating and are responsible and consistent in what they do. Based on this position of advantage and social and moral supremacy, he prepares the terrain to self confer the right to re-center the "real" interest in the discussion, which consists of unraveling the reasons why attendance at certain acts such as demonstrations are promoted by the media. What's more, he devalues the act of demonstrating to the point of ridiculing part of the collective that carries out such behaviors.

His missive creates two "others" based on the two aforementioned categories: an "alter" who is aware and implicated in the cause, who is responsible and consistent in what he does, full of will and who suffers the injustices of the world, and a second "alter" who is unaware and driven to action through rash inertia.

This message closes the episode. The different positions that have developed throughout the interactive sequence which are gathered in the three messages shape a certain social order. In order to understand the shape of this social order, we must, nevertheless, review the audiences that have been molded in our episode.

First, we have the habitual forum participants. Said audience is made up of the ensemble of those participants who regularly intervene in the forum. This is

the audience that is formed in Mario's initial position with the purpose of re-criminating and reprimanding his companions for not having gone to the demonstration. This is clearly drawn in the following fragment:

...Today I went to the demonstration against Pinochet in Barcelona. I didn't see any of you.

The audience brings about two intentions: to construct the group subjected to the recrimination and to drive said group. It positions the person who intervenes as the committed one and the rest of the forum participants as uncommitted.

Secondly, the Demonstrators appear: An audience constructed from two opposite forms in themselves. On one hand there is a group of people who is critical of certain situations of injustice and therefore revindicates certain rights and concrete actions. But on the other hand, there is a group of manipulable people who allow themselves to be influenced and be lead by certain power sectors that want to manipulate them in order to achieve their goals. Here is an example:

... as we all know, people go where they are told, but they have to be told. There is a select core group that believes in the cause and exercises their right to demonstrate; the rest follow the core group ...

This ambivalent audience allows two things to happen. Firstly, to continue accusing and positioning one person as non-committed despite his participation in collective mobilizations. Secondly, it places the actor who speaks in the role of judge or evaluator. He knows that there is a select core group and a large mass of manipulable people. He, of course, belongs to this core group, and he, in short, decides who is and isn't in each one of these groups.

In the second position in the episode, we again observe this audience, although now redefined in pejorative terms. In redefining the "demonstrating" audience the person repositions himself by way of distancing himself and rejecting said audience.

Fully emerged in the third and final position in the episode, the former audience reappears, in its most clearly pejorative version and forms a new one: the moralists. This audience is defined as that group of people who believe they have the right to pass judgment on and tell the others what is good and what is bad. This criminal procedure is constructed as a means of exhibitionism of the acts that each person carries out. This may be appreciated in this fragment from a message:

Sometimes I get more excited about the shots in the back than the rebellious floor at the Corte Inglés department store and for the record, I don't mean anyone in particular (I don't mean you, as I don't know you): I'm talking about moralist behaviors that amaze me and right now inspire me and infuriate me.

As occurs with the previous audience, this one is outlined with the purpose of presenting it as the reference which is rejected, the horizon in the distance.

Throughout the episode positions and re-positions occur. As we have seen, in each position a particular relationship is established between an “alter” and an “ego,” the audiences play a top role in this relationship. Thanks to them, both entities are defined. This entire interactive sequence extracts its meaning from the emergence of an imminent close-up which is no more than positioning. In our case, we find ourselves before socially committed versus non-committed tension. In FOUCAULT terms, we would have found ourselves before the statement that makes it possible to speak and understand which delimits what can be said and not said. But in positioning theory terms, the description of this map, positioning or statement, which has been performatively outlined in the same interaction and which is, therefore, immanent to it and never transcendent, is the socialization itself that emerges from each interactive sequence. Socialization, which of course, varies in its form in each episode which can be found in our forum, and which always refers to the establishment of relational games between an “I” and an “alter.” In next section we will see what this relationship consists of.

## 7. Positioning, Socialization and Conflict

Throughout the entire episode we see how strong tension is managed. It is created by what being socially committed and not committed means. It seems naive to reduce the representation of socialization which is formed in this episode to the aforementioned tension. However, it seems like a graphical and clear way to draw the complex lattice which is woven in it. Once the episode has come to a close, such tension constitutes a way to stabilize a series of very dynamic processes. And, more specifically, a negotiation. Of content, of course: we’ve seen the interchange of opinions, ideas and hopes in the three messages. But, above all, we’ve witnessed the negotiation of identifying definitions.

More than the explicit content, our analysis has shown how each participant positions the other and positions himself. This game is produced based on a discussion on what it is and what it means to be committed to some cause which is considered just. In the constructed audiences, the group of demonstrators stand out, who suffer “as many” changes to its definition as there are interventions in the episode. These range from the consideration of people that are really socially and politically committed, motors of social transformation, to the “gang of conformists” without a clear conscious of what they are revindicating. In this whole game another very important factor intervenes: the narratives that clearly come from a wider context which transcends the forum space. We are referring to the display of a narrative line which refers to the public forms of social revindication and its convenience or not as a strategy for real social change. A similar line is introduced by all of the participants in the episode. In it we can find common ground that transcends the interactive dynamic

and idiosyncratic narrative that is generated in the episode, such as for example, the usefulness of demonstrations for social mobilization, and the hidden interests when it comes to promoting certain demonstrations and the alternative forms of social revindication.

The committed-non committed tension, in its most physical and least metaphoric sense, embodies positioning, and further more, the socialization of this episode. It is the result of a complex negotiation process – as we've tried to show. The tension is precariously sustained; it is drawn from the relationship between positions and audiences. Fundamentally, it allows us to understand the three messages taken from our forum as a unit. It makes it possible to study them as an interactive sequence, as a whole which surpasses the mere content. And as far as the interaction sequence, we've seen that there is an interchange of defining the other and self-definition which only acquires meaning in and based on this positioning. Thus, we have before us the beginning and the end of said positioning. Positioning emerges from it, but due to its emergence we can analyze it and understand it without resorting to transcendental categories. Recurring to the words of a classic anthropologist, we have before us the root of meaning, that thread which is the objective of all ethnographic or qualitative analysis, and which permits the intelligibility of a specific area of meaning produced in a community (GEERTZ, 1998).

Our positioning-episode is an online conflict. It demonstrates what for some authors (LAVE & WENGER, 1991) would be a direct threat to the formation and consolidation of a virtual community. Nevertheless, said opinion and view of conflict, whether found online or offline, is very different from what we have observed in our work. Firstly, we must remember that all conflict is a situated process. In our case, said localization obviously refers to the virtual space, but also to a symbolic space, which is represented by the episode and the positioning in which the conflict is drawn. In fact, this is no more than an interactive sequence, an interchange of positions and repositions as we have already mentioned several times. It prefigures, as in any other interactive sequence, something more than the very content of the interaction but which is its reason for being, or rather, a positioning. Therefore, the online conflict should be analyzed and understood based on the emergence of this intelligibility map. To leave this dimension out would imply decontextualising the conflict and reducing it to the mere expression of its content. Secondly, given that the positioning-episodes can be thought of as the threads that weave the forum into a cultural and symbolic fabric, more than a threat or a danger, the conflict is a contribution to this social space. Thus, the online conflict may contribute to the participation and generation of community density. The conflict defines audiences, and therefore, winds different agents and actors into its outcome. It implicates them, calls them to intervene. Finally, we have seen that the conflict should not be thought of as simply the appearance of extreme and conflicting positions. But rather, as an interaction sequence or process, it involves the

display of negotiation. The implicated actors or agents display positions to the others and to themselves. And they are subjected to the repositioning of the others. Given all of the aforementioned, it can be affirmed that conflict is a dimension of the social reality which is prefigured in such a sequence. It is always closed, or rather, locks in the intervention of each participant, but, it is also continuously open, given that the actors resist the positions that they have been assigned, and at the same time, position the others, construct audiences and try to get other participants involved. To sum up, conflict is participation, and is above all, an opportunity for interaction and, possibly, for change.

## 8. Conclusions

In virtual spaces there exists something more than the mere interchange of messages, information and content. There is a constant game of interaction. What is more is that this game has a very concrete purpose: the individuals are positioned, position others, define audiences and the attitude they have before them. Bit by bit these larger formations, denominated positionings, are woven. What we would like to emphasize is that all of this blurs if our analysis focuses only upon the interchange of content and information. The messages are articulated in totality with greater meanings because in them the narrator performs the aforementioned action of defining one's self and others. The result of these shared efforts the positioning emerges, the axis or plan of a concrete social order. The result is the positioning which fully articulates the sense and meaning of the different positions that converge into an interaction and the various narrative lines that appear to be the same. We continue to insist that this produced is negotiated, as we have seen, and is immanent and contextual. The concept of positioning allows our analysis to go beyond the analysis of micro interaction alone. It has permitted us to define and understand how social order is managed, its general framework of rights and responsibilities, and how future interactions are prepared and past actions reinterpreted. Therefore the micro and macro levels of social analysis are connected. As we have already indicated, positioning is the same sociability that unfolds in interaction. Positioning and sociability are synonymous. In sum, by revealing the articulation of positioning in interaction, it is possible to produce a virtual space to show the emergence of the sociability that rises from the same.

The reader will have noticed that, in the last instance, a virtual space or forum is composed of episodes. At this point, our analysis has moved away from the proposals made by HARRÉ and his collaborators in four clear aspects.

- 1) Given that the work of HARRÉ (1979) and other authors is based on the face to face interaction register, it presents an apparent disconnection between the episode and the discourse or text. As we have basically worked with messages, in these pages the connection between text and episodes that will be seen is substantially stronger. Up until the point when an epi-

sode is formally defined by the set of messages discussing or handling a concrete happening. In this concrete issue, the influence of FOUCAULT's proposals is explicit. The concept of episodes that we have utilized assimilates the discursive practice of the author.

- 2) Secondly, for HARRÉ (1979) episodes are eminently sequential, linking a composition of gestures, actions and words both temporarily and locatively. In addition, the individuals implicated in an episode cannot simultaneously be participating in another. The Humanities forum, as a virtual space, breaks with that sequentiality. Episodes are composed of messages whose emission extends through time, and the participants can be involved in various episodes at the same single moment in time. At this point an extremely interesting field of investigation opens up.
- 3) A very important figure of our analysis, which does not appear in the proposals of HARRÉ (1979), is the listener. This, together with the position and resulting moral order (positioning), forms a triangle of elements that articulate the intelligibility of an episode. Listeners are fundamental because they make up the key tools for positioning and repositioning oneself. At some times the position is defined through assimilation of the listener. Other times this is nothing more than an important, but external, reference point. It provides the ability to maintain a certain identity or idiosyncrasy. Sometimes it is used to set the rest of the speakers in a stable and reified category. Sometimes it is used to generate distance from certain participants within the forum, or it converts in a negative reference point which must be rejected, etc. Throughout the development of the episode the listener can maintain himself intact through his composition, that is to say, through the number of integral parts that make it up. Nevertheless, it is usual to observe how the evolution of the episode and its game of positions is likewise modified and transformed by the listener. To sum up, the listener is figure as lively and important as the position, and it is not possible to mention the former without reference to the latter.
- 4) One of the principle criticisms that positioning theory has received regards the importance given by its analysis to the moral order which defines positioning. To avoid this problem, we have set the positioning as an absolutely immanent event. Certainly, positioning is the reference point and that which gives sense to the interaction, but it is produced and is completely transformed in becoming such. From the interactive practice on it constantly defines its own plan of intelligibility. In this approach we have not done anything besides limit ourselves to the FOUCAULTian definition of discursive practice.

In this sense it is opportune to insist that, within virtual forums, the episode is the basic atom; the fundamental unit which gives sense and meaning to the interaction that emerges from the same episodes. It is certain that we can find



isolated messages, which extract their meaning from dimensions exterior or alien to the forum. For example, a message requesting information on the format of a concrete subject could be placed in our forum. It would, in fact, respond to the institutional function that these forums are assigned in virtual formation. However, it would be foreign to the Humanities forum, and probably receive a quick response and be forgotten. This is due to the fact that episodes, their subject matter, and their development indicate the type of a forum's appropriation as realized by the individuals who participate in it. The episode therefore, looks very much like what GOFFMAN (1979) designated "situated activity." It is an ensemble of practices whose result is the establishment of an order with a concrete purpose. This purpose does not make reference to instrumental aspects alone. It is more, and that is slightly important. What is relevant is that its goal is to establish a plan in which the individuals and their actions are given sense and intelligibility. Defining and analyzing positionings, just as they occur, with micro social focus, means assuming the social, the social ability. It is something that must be produced and maintained and is never something based and maintained *a priori*. (LATOUR, 1999; POTTER, 1996). In any case, it is something which performs both operations at the same time.

To conclude these considerations it is necessary to say something about the theme which is omnipresent in social interaction literature: identity.

An important part of "postmodern" literature focuses on the idea of death, distribution or dispersion of the "I" (GERGEN, 1996; KVALE, 1992). In this sense, the idea of distributed I by BRUNER (1990) is rather significant. The idea of "I" or "one's self" that we operate is no more than a narration that we elaborate in very real circumstances to report our position and location in such circumstances. Therefore the "I" is found distributed throughout the enormous, complex ensemble of narrations that we are capable of elaborating through our daily experience. Well, something very similar occurs with the notion of I in episodes-positionings. Throughout them, the "I" which can be assigned to each participant is a subject narration at a concrete position, surrounded by the relations with other positions and which vary with the episode. This "I" operates and is defined based on processes such as the following:

- 1) Categories that include some individuals and exclude others (for example: man or woman, king of the forum or newcomer ...). That is to say, we have observed the emergence of multiple social categorizations that segment the forum and mark their own social positions and those of others.
- 2) Discursive practices through which said categories are assigned meaning. This does not only include the study of the categories but also the narrative lines from which they come from, and through which different positions are elaborated.
- 3) How individuals position themselves in function of the categories and narrative lines. That is to say, how one's self conceives one's self as be-

longing to one category or another, and in which narrative line one's self places one's self. Our participants continually use categories to define themselves or not and enroll themselves in certain series of events.

- 4) Emotional engagement with the category of belonging and the development of a moral system organized around this belonging. The individuals who transit through the episodes of the Humanities forum are emotionally involved with the categories in which they are received and to which they ascribe. We have seen that this involvement can be so great that such individuals enter into open conflict with others or with the passing of some concrete episode.

These four processes are the starting point from which to explain the constitution of the "I" for each participant in the forum. In this sense, the episodes show the "I" is, in effect, mobile and changeable. It is, in fact, distributed throughout the event of the episode. Additionally, this effect varies from episode to episode. Therefore, it is not erroneous to suggest that a multitude of "I"s exist in the *Humanities and Philology Forum*. If we wish to approach the comprehension of how individuals interact in virtual spaces, we need a metaphor that contemplates how we represent ourselves through the multiple positions in the course of an episode; or how we develop heterogeneous and internally contradictory positions; or how we negotiate new positions rejecting the position we have been assigned at the beginning of the episode. The metaphor of the multiplicity seems suitable for that job.

It is likewise important to underline that we have seen that the acquisition process of our self perception, that is to say the ensemble of images and concepts that we have of ourselves, is not something produced in a unified or coherent form. These perceptions and images change and fluctuate every time we change discourse and position in function of the positions which are incorporated in the interaction. DAVIES y HARRÉ (1999) claim that positioning theory considers the contradiction that can arise between distinct positions in the same episode or between different episodes as natural and productive. Effectively, this is seen in the interaction of our virtual space. The contradiction, laws that represent a problem for interaction, provides the possibility to act with proposition and agency. Since we have the possibility to choose different options from among the contradictory demands, we can select which positions we want to develop and which we want to block. In this way, episodes allow us to consider ourselves as subjects who choose, localizing ourselves in the interaction in function of the positions with which we are familiar, and, in turn, offering these personal stories and points of view through the use of metaphors, characters, arguments, etc. which we have learned in the various interventions in the forum. All of this brings us to a difficult question: within the forum, is the origin of identity developed or would it be more correct to speak of agency?

RHEINGOLD (1993), in an already classic book on communication through computers, dares to define the identity produced in virtual spaces in the following manner:

We reduce and codify our identities into words on a screen; we decode and unpack those identities, separating them from others. The form in which we use these words, (true or false) stories that we tell about ourselves (or about the identity people believe we have) are what determine our identities in cyberspace. The grouping of characters, interacting with one another, determines the naturalness of the cultural collective. (RHEINGOLD, 1993, p.61)

It is interesting to point out that the symbolic processes that RHEINGOLD (1993, 1996) glosses with the concepts “codify” and “unpack” indicate to us, above all, that individuals carry out the active task of searching for their own identities and the identities of others. It also shows, of course, that this task is surrounded by symbolic possibilities that unfold in the interaction environment. Given this condition, the answer to the question of identity is simple: it is precisely the framework of rights and responsibilities that an episode participant possesses in the final configuration that acquired through a game of positions, that is to say in positioning. This framework is result of that which the actor could or could not say or do throughout the development of the different positions that emerged in the situation. In this way, it can be claimed that online identity is the formation of courses of possible and impossible actions. For this reason we consider that within forums and virtual spaces it is more appropriate to speak of agency than identity, given that the problem the analyst runs into is related to the mechanisms that define, establish, unfold and block possibilities for discourse and definitively possibilities for action.

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